

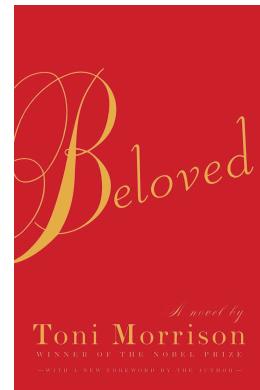
Beloved

Toni Morrison, 1987

Knopf Doubleday

316 pp.

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SUMMARY

Winner, 1988 Pulitzer Prize

Set in rural Ohio several years after the Civil War, this profoundly affecting chronicle of slavery and its aftermath is Toni Morrison's greatest novel, a dazzling achievement, and the most spellbinding reading experience of the decade.

Staring unflinchingly into the abyss of slavery, this novel transforms history into a story as powerful as Exodus and as intimate as a lullaby. Sethe, its protagonist, was born a slave and escaped to Ohio, but eighteen years later she is still not free.

She has too many memories of Sweet Home, the beautiful farm where so many hideous things happened. And Sethe's new home is haunted by the ghost of her baby, who died nameless and whose tombstone is engraved with a single word: Beloved. (*From the publisher.*)

AUTHOR BIO

- Birth name: Chloe Anthony Wofford
- Birth: February 18, 1931
- Where: Lorain, Ohio, USA
- Education: B.A., Howard University; M.A., Cornell,
- Awards: Nobel Prize, 1993
Pulitzer Prize, 1988
National Book Critics' Circle Award, 1977

With her incredible string of lyrical, imaginative, and adventurous modern classics Toni Morrison lays claim to being one of America's best novelists. Race issues are at the heart of many of Morrison's most enduring novels, from the ways that white concepts of beauty affect a girl's self image in *The Bluest Eye* to themes of segregation in *Sula* and slavery in her signature work *Beloved*. Through it all, Morrison relates her tales with lyrical eloquence and spellbinding mystery.

Born Chloe Anthony Wofford, Morrison's unique approach to writing stems from a childhood spent steeped in folklore and mythology. Her family reveled in sharing these often tales, and their commingling of the fantastic and the natural would become a key element in her work when she began penning original tales of her own.

The other majorly influential factor in her writing was the racism she experienced firsthand in, as *Jet* magazine described it, the "mixed and sometimes hostile neighborhood" of Lorain, Ohio. When Morrison was only a toddler, her home was set afire by racists while her family was still inside of it. During times such as these, she

found strength in her father, who instilled in her a great sense of dignity. This pride in her cultural background would heavily influence her debut novel.

In *The Bluest Eye*, an eleven-year old black girl named Pecola prays every night for blue eyes, seeing them as the epitome of feminine beauty. She believes these eyes, symbolizing commonly held white concepts of attractiveness, would put an end to her familial woes, an end to her father's excessive drinking and her brother's meandering. They would give her self-esteem and purpose. *The Bluest Eye* is the first of Toni Morrison's cries for racial pride and it is an auspicious debut told with an eerie poeticism.

Morrison next tackled segregation in *Sula*, which chronicles the friendship between two women who, much like the author, grew up in a small, segregated village in Ohio. *Song of Solomon* followed. Arguably her first bona fide classic and certainly her most lyrical work, *Song of Solomon* breathed with the mythology of Morrison's youth, a veritable modern folktale pivoting on an eccentric whimsically named Milkman Dead who spends his life trying to fly. This is one of Morrison's most breathtaking, most accomplished and fully dimensional novels, a story of powerful convictions told in an unmistakably original manner.

In *Song of Solomon*, Morrison created a distinct world where the supernatural commingles comfortably with the mundane, a setting that would reappear in her masterpiece, *Beloved*. *Beloved* is a ghost story quite unlike any other, a tale of guilt and love and the horrendous legacy of slavery. Taking place not long after the end of the Civil War, *Beloved* finds Sethe, a former slave, being haunted by the daughter she murdered to save the child from being sold into slavery. It is a gut wrenching story that is buoyed by its fantastical plot device and the sheer beauty of Morrison's prose.

Beloved so moved Morrison's literary peers that forty-eight of them signed an open letter published in the *New York Times* demanding she be recognizing for this major effort. Subsequently, the book won her a Pulitzer Prize. A year after publishing her next novel *Jazz* in 1992, she would become the very first African American to win the Nobel Prize for Literature.

Towards the end of the century, Morrison's work became increasingly eclectic. She not only published another finely crafted, incendiary novel in *Paradise*, which systematically tracks the genesis of an act of mob violence, but she also published her first children's book *The Big Box*. In 2003, she published *Love*, her first novel in five years, a complex meditation on family and the way one man fuels the obsessions of several women. The following year she assembled a collection of photographs of school children taken during the era of segregation. What makes *Remember: The Journey to School Integration* so particularly haunting is that Morrison chose to compose dialogue imagining what the subjects of each photo may have been thinking. In 2008, Morrison published *A Mercy*.

That imagination, that willingness to take chances, to examine history through a fresh perspective, is such an integral part of Morrison's craft. She is as vital as any contemporary artist, and her stories may focus on the black American experience, but the eloquence, imaginativeness, and meaningfulness of her writing leaps high over any racial boundaries.

Extras

- Chloe Anthony Wofford chose to publish her first novel under the name Toni Morrison because she believed that Toni was easier to pronounce than Chloe. Morrison later regretted assuming the nom de plume.
- In 1986, the first production of Morrison's sole play *Dreaming Emmett* was staged. The play was based on the story of Emmett Till, a black teen murdered by racists in 1955.

BOOK REVIEWS

“This work well deserves its place in the pantheon of enduring Literature. Possibly the most powerful and imaginative rendering of slavery that exists, *Beloved* confronts the horror of both its practice and its legacy. While sometimes raw, we are always returned to the redemptive presence of family and community.” —A *LitLovers LitPick* (March '08)

“A work that brings to the darkest corners of American experience the wisdom, and the courage, to know them as they are.” —*New York Review of Books*

“When Toni Morrison was an editor at Random House, she edited *The Black Book*, an anthology/scrapbook of African American history. While working on the book, she ran across a newspaper article about a woman named Margaret Garner, a runaway slave who killed her children, slitting the throat of one and bashing in the skull of the other, to prevent them from being recaptured by the slave hunters hot on their trail.

This upside down story of motherly love expressed through child murder haunted Morrison for many years and finally manifest itself in fictional form in her Pulitzer Prize-winning fifth novel, *Beloved*. A poetic chronicle of slavery and its aftermath, it describes how that inhuman ordeal forced cruel choices and emotional pain on its victims and gave them memories that would possess them long after they were released from their physical bondage. Morrison uses the story to address a key question for black people then and now: How can we let go of the pain of the past and redeem the sacrifices made in the struggle for freedom?

Beloved is both beautiful and elusive: beautiful for its powerful and captivating language, and elusive not just because of its reliance on visions of haunts and apparitions, but in its narrative interweaving of the past and present, the physical and the spiritual. For all of its supernatural elements, however, *Beloved* is most notable as a powerful tribute to the real-life struggles of a generation of black men and women to reconcile the horrors of the past and move on. The spirit of *Beloved* and the recurring memories of the tribulations Sethe endured on the plantations she lived on and escaped from were both testaments to the tangibly powerful hold that slavery had on her. In the end, she is able to recover her life only by finding within herself and her community the spiritual tools strong enough to exorcise her of this haunting. In this, Sethe's struggle is the struggle of all African Americans: the struggle to redeem ourselves, our families, and our communities from the wreckage of the past even as we honor the sacrifices made for survival.” —*Sacred Fire*

“Mixed with the lyric beauty of the writing, the fury in Morrison's...book is almost palpable...a haunting chronicle of slavery and its aftermath set in rural Ohio in the wake of the Civil War. The brilliantly conceived story...should not be missed.” —*Publishers Weekly*

“Powerful is too tame a word to describe Toni Morrison's searing new novel of post-Civil War Ohio. Morrison, whose myth-laden storytelling shone in *Song of Solomon* and other novels, has created an unforgettable world in this novel about ex-slaves haunted by violent memories. Before the war, Sethe, pregnant, sent her children away to their grandmother in Ohio, whose freedom had been paid for by their father. Sethe runs too, but when her "owners" come to recapture her, she attempts to murder the children, succeeding with one, named *Beloved*. This murder will (literally) haunt Sethe for the rest of her life and affect everyone around her. A fascinating, grim, relentless story, this important book by a major writer belongs in most libraries.” —*Ann H. Fisher, Radford Public Library, Va., Library Journal*

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. Consider the extent to which slavery dehumanizes individuals by stripping them of their identity, destroying their ability to conceive of the self. Consider, especially, Paul and how he can't determine whether screams he hears are his or someone else's. How do the other characters reflect self-alienation?
2. Discuss the different roles of the community in betraying and protecting the house at 124. What larger issue might Morrison be suggesting here about community.
3. What does Beloved's appearance represent? What about her behavior? Why does she finally disappear—what drives her departure? And why is the book's title named for her?
4. Talk about the choice Sethe made regarding her children when schoolteacher arrives to take them all back to Sweet Home. Can her actions be justified—are her actions rational or irrational?
5. What does the narrator mean by the warning at the end: this is not a story to pass on." Is he right...or not?

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